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ABSTRACT

A study explored the research agenda of "Public Relations Review," the oldest scholarly journal in the public relations field. To provide a descriptive and inferential analysis of the content of the journal from 1985 to 1994, four volumes were selected at random (1985, 1987, 1991, and 1993) and all the articles in them were analyzed. Each article was coded for content, research design, sample size utilized (for quantitative research), theoretical framework, and any reference to the pedagogical implications of the study or its findings. In all, 96 articles were coded. Results showed that 85 of the articles were written by academics; ten by practicing professionals; and one by a student. The most common topic (16.7%) had to do with the development of theories applicable or even unique to public relations. The next most frequent categories of topics had to do with ethics and social responsibility (10%), general practitioner skills and techniques (10%), and public relations history (10%). The most frequent research theme was introspective (41%), followed by applied (38%). Only 19% were coded as basic research. These findings corroborate J. V. Pavlik's contention (1987) that public relations research emphasizes the practical at the expense of the theoretical. The latter is more common in mature scientific disciplines. (Contains 5 tables of research results and 12 references.) (TB)

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Research Agendas and Pedagogical Applications:

What *Public Relations Review* Tells Us

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Introduction

The emergence of any scholarly field always coincides with the development and growth of an empirically-based body of scientific knowledge as well as with its maturation as an academic discipline. The field of public relations, which may be just beginning to emerge from its adolescence, is no exception. When John Pavlik published his book, *Public Relations: What Research Tells Us*, is 1987, he wrote that his goal was to provide a "conceptual map of the field . . . based on the best available scholarly information" (p. 10).

Pavlik explored applied, theoretical and introspective research to produce his "portrait." He found that only a small fraction of the research had been devoted to theory building, while the vast majority had dealt with "specific, practical problems or issues" (p. 17). It was Pavlik's contention that PR educators need to identify areas of basic, or theory-building, research, develop systematic research programs around these foci, and incorporate the findings into public relations curricula.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the research agenda of *Public Relations Review*, the oldest scholarly journal in the field, during the past ten years (1985-1994) and to provide a portrait of research in the discipline. Through the use of a systematic content analysis of a random selection of articles appearing in *PRR*, this paper will provide a descriptive and inferential analysis, looking specifically at any

pedagogical implications of the research. In a sense, this paper explores the extent to which educators and researchers in the field of public relations have heeded the recommendations advanced by Pavlik nearly a decade ago.

Background

This paper is a part of a panel whose scope and objective is to explore the agendas and pedagogical applications of research from a number of major journals serving the public relations discipline--*Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Journalism Quarterly*, and *Public Relations Quarterly*, for example.

Public Relations Review. When the first issue was published in the Summer of 1975, the editor wrote that the journal's purpose was to

> build a bridge between the worlds of social and behavioral science and communication research and the world of professional public relations. . . .the findings of the scientists need to be translated and interpreted so they can be applied by the practitioner. That is the purpose of *Public Relations Review*--to provide a bridge over the gap between those who are systematically studying human behavior and those who can apply the results of that study in their professional practice. ("Why a new journal. . .", 1975, p. 3)

Several years before the publication of the *Review's* first issue, however, the initial efforts were made to compile the field's first official body of knowledge

(VanLeuven, 1990). In 1974, Robert Bishop published an hardbound bibliography identifying as many as 10,000 books, articles, and speeches that directly or indirectly touched upon public relations. Two years later, Grunig and Hickson (1976) analyzed this early body of knowledge and reported that only about 2 percent of the entries were actually research articles.

In the early 1980s, *Public Relations Review* continued as the only scholarly journal in the field. It quickly became the focus of researchers seeking to provide a descriptive analysis of the state of research in public relations. Broom, Cox, Kreuger, and Liebler (1982), for example, conducted a comparison of the content of the *Public Relations Journal* (a trade publication published by PRSA) and *Public Relations Review*. They reported that the *Review's* content was dominated by philosophical and theoretical commentaries and essays, limited descriptive research and case studies (see also VanLeuven, 1990). Six years later, Gaudino and Steele (1988) reported that while articles based on the use of empirical research methods were becoming more frequent in the *Review*, the content continued to be dominated by general philosophical or argumentative essays. Case studies continued to be a major staple of the journal and articles based on the testing or predictive hypotheses remained very rare (VanLeuven, 1990).

An official "body of knowledge" was published in the Review in 1988 and updated in 1990. In an essay in the *Review*, VanLeuven (1990) discussed the implications and applications of this body of knowledge for the field. Nonetheless,

VanLeuven argues that public relations remains far from a "mature" discipline and that the field

> needs more fully developed lines of research even though what's presented in the Public Relations Body of Knowledge Abstracts suggests a more comprehensive field of study and practice than ever before. That said, several (Body of Knowledge) board members continue to cite Grunig and Hunt's (1984) concern that the body of knowledge must provide the intellectual core that leading practitioners and educators will accept as the subject matter of public relations. (p. 23)

Methodology

In order to provide a descriptive and inferential analysis of the content of *Public Relations Review* from the 10-year period of 1985 through 1994, four complete volumes were selected at random and all articles in these volumes, excluding editor's introductions and book reviews, were content analyzed.

The four years selected at random were 1985, 1987, 1991, and 1993. Bound volumes for each of these years were obtained at the Holland Library on the Washington State University campus. The unit of analysis was the entire article. Each article was coded based on a scheme developed by the author which utilized the key descriptive terms in the body of knowledge to categorize the content of each article.

Each article was coded for content, research design[1], sample size utilized (for quantitative research), theoretical framework[2], and any reference to the pedagogical implications of the study or its findings.

In addition, overall content was also coded into one of the three categories developed by Pavlik (1987): basic, applied, and introspective.[3] Applied research, Pavlik explains is designed to solve specific problems or to look at specific public relations skills and activities. Basic research "can be applied across situations and is designed to build a 'basic' body of knowledge upon which future research or problem solving can rest" (p. 24). Finally, introspective research "represents a form of self examination" (p. 24) for the field. Examples of introspective research would be analyses of gender or minority experiences in the profession or an examination of ethical orientation of practitioners.

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[1]Research designs were coded as being either quantitative or qualitative. They were then further broken down into methodological categories that included, for example, General Essay, Survey, Case Study, Historical Analysis, Legal Analysis, Quasi-experimental, and Content Analysis.

[2]Articles were coded as having a theoretical framework if the author or authors provided a description of a theory upon which the study was based, or, if in the discussion, the author or authors attempted to indicate how the findings extended, corroborated , or suggested a new or existing theory. The coding scheme also recorded the frequency of each theory referenced in an article.

[3] Pavlik, however, indicates that it is possible for research to fall into more than one of these three themes. Although, he suggests that in most cases there will be a primarily theme. "Research on PR roles," he explains, is primarily introspective, but it does aid our basic, theoretical understanding of the nature of the field" (p. 25). In this case, for example, roles research would be categorized as "introspective."

Findings

In all, 96 articles from the four volumes were coded.[4] Not surprisingly, 85 (88.5 percent) of the articles were written academics, 10 (10.4 percent) were written by practicing PR professionals, and one was student authored. An overview of the overall content topics of the articles is presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the most frequent topic are had to do with the development of theories applicable, or even unique, to public relations (16.7%). This category included articles that focused on creating and extending theoretical definitions of public relations and process models (such as Grunig's asymmetrical and symmetrical typology). The next most frequent categories centered on Ethics and Social Responsibility (10.4%), general practitioner skills and techniques (10.4%), and public relations history (10.4%).

Insert Table 1 about here

As can be seen from Table 1, twenty-two different topical categories were created to code the articles from the four years sampled. The relatively low frequencies, and corresponding small percentages, is an indication that relatively few

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[4] It should be noted that of the four years, or 16 issues, examined, three issues had clearly defined themes. One focused on ethics, while the other two focused on the development of paradigm issues in public relations and the history and evolution of modern PR practices. A fourth issue devoted more than half of its articles to the relationship of marketing to public relations.

topics actually dominated the *Review's* overall content during the period.

Table 2, however, re-codes the data according to the three thematic categories utilized by Pavlik (1987). As can been seen, the most frequent research theme was "introspective" (41.7%), followed closely by "applied" (38.5%). Only nineteen of the articles (19.8%) were coded into the "basic" research category. A one-tailed chi-square performed on the data in Table 2 suggests that the distribution of the themes, in particular the higher frequency of "introspective" articles, is in fact statistically significant ($X^2 = 8.06$, $p < .05$). This result corroborates early statements made by Pavlik (1987) that public relations research tends to emphasize practical, applied and introspective issues at the expense of developing more nomothetic, theoretically driven research common in a more "mature" scientific discipline.

Insert Table 2 about here

Given the data reported in Table 2, it is not surprising then that the most frequent "methodology" used in the *Review* articles from the four-year sample is "general essay." As Table 3 indicates, 49 or 51 percent of the articles were general essays of an informational or argumentative nature. An analysis of the data in Table 3 yielded a statistically significant outcome ($X^2 = 176.61$, d.f. = 7, $p < .0001$). Twenty-

eight, or 29.2 percent, of the articles reported the results of surveys, most typically using the membership of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) as a sampling universe and sampling frame. As can be seen from Table 3, other methodologies, such as historical approaches, case studies and content analyses, were less frequently utilized. It is interesting to note that most sample sizes utilized in these surveys tended to be small; the most frequent sample size falling between 150 and 199 subjects (See Table 4). While three surveys reported response rates of 500 or more, four of the published studies were based on fewer than 99 useable responses.

Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

If the theoretical references made in the sampled articles is any indication, research in public relations remains focused on developing and refining definitions and models of public relations practices and behaviors (See Table 5). It should be noted that only 47, or approximately 49 percent, of the articles in the sample included a description or explanation of their theoretical foundations or attempted to argue the theoretical implications of the findings. In addition to the attempts at building general definitions and models, the second most frequently utilized theories were drawn from rhetorical and critical frameworks. The next most frequently cited theories were general systems theory and the Practitioner Role Typology developed by Broom and

Smith (1979). Table 5 may suggest a relatively narrow range of theoretical ideas being incorporated into the research. Finally, it should also be noted that only seven (7.3%) of the 96 articles in the sample included an analysis of the pedagogical implications of the findings in their discussions. This should be somewhat surprising given the interest in Review by the academic community during the past 20 years and the fact that the vast majority of the authors appearing in the journal are academics.

Insert Table 5 about here

Discussion

Given the topics reported in the previous section, those that appear to be high on the agendas of leading researchers, two questions should be asked: 1) Should this agenda be the focus of our teaching and curriculum? and 2) How do we bring these themes--as well as those apparently missing from this agenda--fully into the center of our teaching? L. Grunig (1990) has previously, and correctly, noted that "the way we learn affects what we learn." The challenge of this section of the paper is to produce a coherent and succinct response to the principal question of this panel, "what are the pedagogical applications and implications of the field's research agenda?" As L. Grunig (1990) explained:

> Both the content of the courses we teach and the climate of our classrooms should foster students' understanding of what exists, what is possible and what is ideal. . .(p. 2)

The Need To Teach Multiple Paradigms

One of the implications of the research agenda discussed in the previous agenda may be the need to move public relations curriculum beyond what may be a relatively narrow focus on introspective and applied themes. This is not to suggest that they be eliminated. Recent *Review* articles on the "educational paradigm struggle" in the field, however, suggests current curricular approaches may be casting our students into a narrowly defined perception of what is appropriate practice and activities--a technician paradigm (Culbertson, 1987).

Culbertson (1985), for example, posited that public relations educators model their curriculum and teaching styles to accommodate their dominant orientation toward what they perceive to be the principal role of practitioners. After surveying PR educators, he reported that the communication technician role, "with a focus on writing and producing messages, stood out as quite distinct from other roles" (p. 18). He noted the existence of two types of communication technician roles:

> First was a narrow position focusing on technical aspects of production but not on writing or liaison (media relations) work. Second some educators took a broader communication technician view, emphasizing writing, publication

> production, and media relations while still downplaying broader behavioral science and management-related concerns. (p. 19)

The implications of this can be best understood after examining he initial statement made by the editors in the inaugural issue of the *Review*. The statement somehow seems to imply that practitioners are unable, on their own, to understand the complexities of human and social behavior influenced by public relations practices. The operative paradigm behind such an assumption--it should be no surprise--ultimately leads to conceptualization of public relations as a technical function. The vast majority of students who were taught by those who published in the *Review* in those early years are now mid-way through their professional careers--hopefully still in public relations--and, in all probability, now reaching mid- to senior-level management status. It is also likely, however, that they carry with them the paradigm learned in their college communication, journalism or public relations courses.

In their comparison of the prevailing paradigms of public relations education in Europe and the United States, Hazelton and Cutbirth (1993) explain that in this country the emphasis is almost exclusively placed on preparing students for entry-level jobs, while in the higher education systems of Europe the emphasis is on preparing for future job advancement--most typically into management. They contend:

> We heartily endorse the European assumption that public relations is a management concern of organizations. It thus becomes obvious that the

purpose of the public relations curriculum should lead students into management. Having made this observation, however it now becomes vital that we understand exactly what is meant by management.

Management in public relations is an applied, rather than technical, endeavor. In other words, management is broader and more abstract than constructing a press release or outlining a brochure. Management involves critical decision making, management of personnel, problem solving and analytical thinking. These ar applied skills in that they require the application of theory to practice. They illustrate our earlier assertion that theory and practice in public relations are intertwined. Thus, the ideal public relations curriculum should emphasize the type of reflective learning and theory found in European Institutes. While the basic, technical skills remain important, we view them as a prelude or pre-requisite to the types of courses that should be emphasized in a contemporary, broad-based public relations program of study. (p. 195)

Finally, Hallahan (1993) has suggested that this need to change educational paradigms may require a shift that would be nothing short of a Kuhnian revolution as we sift through what he has identified as seven possible alternative paradigms. These paradigms range from professional-oriented, process-driven approaches to

behavioral and systems approaches based on principles of management science and cybernetic models of organization-environment interactions. Hallahan explains:

> Without a dominant paradigm, it is difficult to prepare prospective practitioners for careers and to provide them with a coherent framework to understand the field. . . .Until the field comes to grips with the paradigm problem, educators must continue to emphasize the relative strengths and weaknesses of each (approach or world view), and encourage students to think critically about these alternative views of the field. (p. 204)

"Craft" vs. Theory-Oriented Instruction

The relatively atheoretical nature of the research appearing in *Public Relations Review* corroborates and further illuminates the preceding arguments and suggests the need for both undergraduate and graduate curricula that expose students to a broad range of theories from the behavioral and social sciences that can be applied to the understanding of the public relations endeavor. Instruction should encourage students, for example, to analyze and explore specific public relations cases from the perspective of different theoretical frameworks or "eye glasses." Pfau and Parrott's (1993) text, *Persuasive Communication Campaigns*, for example, develops inoculation theory as a framework from which communication campaigns of all types--political, commercial, and social--can be examined. Campaign class discussions and seminars should, then, devote equal amounts of time to both the teaching of process

mechanics and the search for theoretical understanding.

Secondly, the fact that the most dominant theoretical area of the *Review's* agenda focused on defining and development models for public relations behaviors and practices corroborates early concerns that too much emphasis may be placed on what public relations *is* at the expense of exploring how we bring about change and effects. In addition, the narrow range of research methodologies suggest a greater need to teach the principles of social and behavioral research, particularly within the context of the broad range of theories in related disciplines, in public relations, particularly at the graduate level.

Conclusion

As L. Grunig (1990) suggested, we have taught perhaps a perception of what might exist, but we have, without doubt, ignored what is possible and, most certainly, what is ideal. In our race to build high-tech writing labs and teach the intricacies of desk-top publishing software programs to our students, we may have forged a deeper impression among these students that public relations is merely a craft, a vocational activity that is more about doing things than thinking critically about them. Perhaps one solution might be to spend less time in writing labs and more time engaged in small group seminars that emphasize problem solving and managing.

A recent thread on the PRForum, an online newsgroup for public relations professionals, for example, has rekindled the debate about the nature of public

relations education and underscored this point. It is interesting to note the number of practitioners posting messages to the group who claim that they have survived and succeeded in spite of their public relations educations. A number of our nation's leading public relations degree programs have not been spared from criticism on this thread. The general consensus of the many dozens of postings to the bbs has been that the "craft" orientation of the teaching of public relations has been a near-disabling limitation on the careers of many of the fields' practitioners. It is not surprising, then, that many posters recommended that individuals who might be inclined to pursue public relations as a career consider majoring in something else.

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"Why a new journal? To build a bridge. . ." (1975). Public Relations Review, 1 (1), 3-4.

Table 1
Article Topics In *Public Relations Review* (1985, 1987, 1991, 1993)
n = 96

Topic	Frequency	(Percent)
General Theory Building, Definitions and Models of PR	16	(16.7%)
Ethics, Values & Social Responsibility	10	(10.4)
General Practitioner skills and techniques	10	(10.4)
History of Public Relations	10	(10.4)
Government and Military PR	6	(6.3)
Gender and Minority Issues	5	(5.2)
Practitioner Roles (Basic Model)	5	(5.2)
Crisis Communications	5	(5.2)
Managing the PR Function	4	(4.2)
Integrated Marketing Communications & PR	4	(4.2)
Customer Relations	3	(3.1)
Campaigns and Effects	3	(3.1)
Future Trends in PR (general)	3	(3.1)
International PR	2	(2.1)
PR in Professional Service Areas	2	(2.1)
PR Education and Training	2	(2.1)
Educational PR	1	(1)
Employee Relations/Communications	1	(1)
Corporate Philanthropy	1	(1)
Investor Relations/PR	1	(1)
Use of New Technologies	1	(1)
Legal Issues	1	(1)

Table 2
Pavlik's Research Themes in *Public Relations Review* Articles
(1985, 1987, 1991, 1993)

Research Theme	Frequency	Percent
Introspective	40	(41.7%)
Applied	37	(38.5)
Basic	19	(19.8)

$X^2 = 8.06$, d.f. = 2, $p < .05$
n = 96

Table 3
Methodological Designs of *Public Relations Review*
Articles (1985, 1987, 1991, 1993)
n=96

Method	Frequency	Percentage
General Essay	49	(51%)
Survey	28	(29.2)
Historical	7	(7.3)
Case Study	4	(4.2)
Content Analysis	4	(4.2)
Meta-Analysis	2	(2.1)
Focus Group	1	(1)
In-depth Interviews	1	(1)

$X^2 = 176.61$, d.f. = 7, $p < .0001$

Table 4
Usable Samples Sizes of Survey Research
Reported in *Public Relations Review* (1985, 1987, 1991, 1993)
n = 28

Sample Size	Frequency	Percentage
0 to 50	1	(3.8%)
51-99	3	(10.7)
100-149	3	(10.7)
150-199	6	(21.4)
200-249	3	(10.7)
250-299	4	(14.3)
300-349	2	(7.1)
350-399	2	(7.1)
400-449	1	(3.8)
450-499	0	(0)
500 or more	3	(10.7)

Table 5
Theoretical Foundations in Public Relations Review Articles
(1985, 1987, 1991, 1993)

Theory Referenced or Utilized	Frequency
Conceptual Definitions of PR and General Models	19
Critical and Rhetorical Theories	10
General Systems Theory	9
PR Practitioner Roles Typology	9
Strategic Contingencies and Power Theories	4
Agenda Setting and Information Subsidies	4
Hage-Hull Typology	3
General Theories of Consumer Behavior	3
Decision Theory	2
Situational Theory of Publics	1
Coorientation Theory	1
Diffusion of Innovations	1
Uses and Gratifications/Dependency/Involvement	1
Persuasion Theories--Social Learning	1
Constructivism--Message Processing Models	1
Game Theory	1